

ALASKA MARINE HIGHWAY

— 50TH ANNIVERSARY —

Tustumena Radio Shack

Aft on the port side of the *Tustumena*'s wheelhouse, in the days long before GMDSS (Global Marine Distress Safety System), a cramped radio room occupied a small space, complete with a bank of radios from deck to overhead along the aft bulkhead. Inside were also found a desk, a swivel chair, a typewriter, a telegraph key, and a porthole to allow fresh air into the small, stuffy space. Our two radio operators, a Chief Radio Operator, and a Second Radio Operator spent their time here and maintained the ship's antennas, radio and electronic navigation equipment.

Tustumena's radio suite included MF CW (medium frequency continuous wave or Morse code), HF CW (high frequency continuous wave or Morse code), headphones and a telegraph key. In the wheelhouse were located HF SSB (high frequency single-side band radios), VHF (very high frequency radios), Loran-C (radio signals used for fixing our position electronically). Additionally, the radio operators maintained the World War II vintage LF RDF (low frequency radio direction finder, an older type of electronic navigation for fixing our position), and the radar units and their rotating scanners and motors.

Our call sign, **WNGW**, was posted proudly at the radio operator's desk in large, bold letters. Here, our two radio operators stood their individual watches when out on the Gulf of Alaska, usually six hours on and six hours off, listening to CW with headphones, receiving and sending messages. Often the sounds of endless Morse code chatter spilled into the nighttime wheelhouse with the signals coming in so fast it was a wonder anyone could decipher it. To our radio operators, CW was a language they understood fluently and instantly.



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We had no weather fax or NAVTEX printouts. Our weather forecasts came by CW, our radio operators typing the weather as fast as it was sent through the air. Ripping a completed page from the typewriter, they handed the weather report to the mate on watch. Part of my job as a Third Mate was to display, by drawing with various-colored marker pens, the report on a clear plexi-glass board covering a large chart of the Gulf of Alaska just outside the radio room. Drawing circular low-pressure or high-pressure areas on the plexi-glass by using a jar lid for a template, I marked the circles with a red L for low pressure, or a black H for high pressure.

Next, I drew arching weather fronts, warm fronts, cold fronts, or occluded fronts, as they streamed from the Aleutians and marched into the Gulf of Alaska. I wrote in the expected wind and its direction with feathered wind arrows, and the expected sea conditions. Our captain could come to the wheelhouse and see at a glance the latest weather picture. “Looks like trouble heading our way,” he might say, and plan his strategy accordingly. As a new Third Mate, I was learning the weather patterns of the formidable Gulf of Alaska.

One black, stormy night on a voyage to Kodiak, with the *Tustumena* struggling through high seas, our young Second Radio Operator, Dan Freeman, let out a blood-curdling scream, as though he was receiving a continuous electrical shock. The door to the radio room was closed to prevent light from ruining the mate’s night vision in the wheelhouse. Wind whistled underneath the door crack. I raced aft to the radio shack and opened the door not knowing what to expect. There I found Dan lying on his back on the deck with the headphones firmly attached and covering his ears, still listening to CW as a strong, cold wind whistled through the radio room porthole. I asked with some concern, “Are you okay?”

Dan adjusted his headphones and replied with a smile, his teeth showing



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through his beard, “I am fine, just letting off a little steam.” I closed the door and returned to the wheelhouse. Listening to CW for hours at a time would drive anyone nuts; I was sympathetic. In



Second Radio Operator, Dan Freeman, sitting in the *Tustumena's* Radio Shack.

their spare time, a former Chief Radio Operator built radios in his stateroom, while others rigged up ham radios and associated antennas in their staterooms. These people could never have enough radio. *Tustumena's* radio operators were dedicated radio professionals, masters of electronics, providing a high level of security

because they could fix our radio equipment and radars while at sea.

“I don't recall the last name of the old fella that was there when I first came on board,” recounts Bob Kern, one of the *Tustumena's* last Chief Radio Operators and present day owner of the popular KFMJ FM radio station in Ketchikan. “His first name was Cliff, I think. I do remember that he made net shopping bags and other macramé items day and night. I once asked Cliff if he sold them in his off time. He just said they were ‘very popular with the ladies’ and gave me a big grin.” Radio, electronic navigation, and radar technology advanced, and the *Tustumena* radio operators were no longer necessary. The *Tustumena's* once crackling radio shack is today a quiet wheelhouse storeroom.

Written and Photograph Provided by Captain Bill Hopkins, AMHS Retired

